

Appropriations Committee
Public Hearing on Governor's Proposed Budget
Human Services

March 4th, 2011

Madam Chair(s) and members of the committee:

My name is Debra Ruel. I am the chair of the family law department at Rome McGuigan, P.C. in Hartford. I am a co-founder of the Children's Law Center, ("CLC") and exceedingly proud of the work done by its attorneys and staff.

Early on, the CLC determined to focus its efforts on the representation of children, either as guardians *ad litem* (GAL's) or as attorneys for the minor children (AMC's) in high-conflict cases in family court. These are cases where the child is likely to be subjected to substance abuse problems, mental health factors or domestic violence, and where there are very limited or no financial resources available to the family. These are the most difficult cases, which devour the resources of the family courts.

The need for the CLC is demonstrated by the overwhelming number of children that we have no capacity to serve, the expansion of our services into several jurisdictions and the urgent requests for legal services from our trial judges.

Our family court judges often request that the CLC take on "just one more case", often knowing that our case intake has already been closed. When we expanded our services from Hartford to the surrounding towns (New Britain, New Haven, Waterbury, Rockville and Putnam), our caseloads were almost immediately at maximum levels. Please consider the dilemma of the family court judge when a mother and a father stand before the court, each alleging a different story. For example, Mother tells a convincing story that she has been prevented from seeing her children by Father and that he is not providing adequate food for them, or adequate supervision of them; that Father has abused her in the past; and that the children are miserable and crying because they miss her. Father states that Mother has a history of drug abuse and drops the children off at his house without advance notice for weeks at a time, and without regard to his work schedule, or any child care arrangements; that the children feel safe with him and do not wish to return to Mother's house because they don't like her boyfriend.

Our attorneys assist the court to determine what is in the best interests of these vulnerable children, many of whom are infants and toddlers. They investigate the facts, speak with the children and alert the court to any special factors or circumstances that would impact the court's decision. Our attorneys attempt to relate to the parents their importance to the children and assist them to have better communication with each other regarding parenting issues through the Families in Transition program. Most of the work of the CLC occurs outside of the courtroom, in the community. Most often, the CLC attorneys assist the parents to bring an agreement into court without the need for lengthy hearings or trials.

So what is the impact of the CLC upon a child's life? What are the factors that predict the future success of a child? Why should the State continue funding our efforts? The CLC has tackled the task of trying to create and implement outcome measures that will demonstrate to our supporters and our funders the value of our services not only to the individual child but to the larger community. Aside from the conservation of scarce judicial resources, which is relatively susceptible to quantification, it is difficult to measure an individual child's sense of well-being when there is peace at home. Improved school performance, decreased involvement with law enforcement and the containment of the parent's conflict once the case is concluded, are some of the factors the CLC intends to develop as outcome measures demonstrating the value of the CLC to the children served, our private individual and institutional funders, and the taxpayers of the State of Connecticut.

The CLC is an integral part of our State's outreach to self-represented parents and their very vulnerable children. We collaborate with the judicial department in training attorneys to represent these children, through the Guardian Ad Litem Academy. Continuation of the State's commitment to CLC's funding will relieve stressed judicial resources, provide a conduit for poor families to interface with the judicial system and, most importantly, protect the children from the devastating effects of the risk factors inherent in high-conflict custody cases.